

Commercial radio stinks these days, in large part because the current regulations allow large operators to own up to eight stations in large markets like Philadelphia (and a virtually unlimited number of stations nationwide). In fact, only one commercial FM station licensed to Philadelphia is still "independent" and not owned by one of the large group operators, and that's B-101, WBEB-FM, whose local operators own no other stations anywhere.

It's easy to see why most stations in town sound like each other, and why -- from city to city -- there isn't much variation in what you hear any more. The "economies of scale" that the FCC and the industry promised would promote radio diversity when the multiple ownership rules were relaxed several years ago have actually produced precisely the opposite outcome -- homogenized formats, tightly controlled playlists and mind-numbing repetition -- all in the name of maximizing revenues and minimizing costs, so as to enable the large group owners to make money even after paying insane prices for stations throughout the late 1990's. As an example, Greater Media paid a reported \$43 million for the former classical outlet WFLN(FM), a station that is now on its THIRD set of call letters (as WMWX) and third unsuccessful format in the past few years. Meanwhile, Philadelphia has no full-time classical music station; the format now shares time with jazz on Temple University's WRTI(FM).

A long-time ethnic station, formerly WIBF-FM, Jenkintown, PA was sold to a group operator; the ethnic programming was dropped immediately thereafter, and the station now programs a hip-hop flavored variation of contemporary hit radio.

I'm a volunteer host every Friday afternoon at WRDV-FM, 89.3, Warminster, which plays music from the big band and swing era all day every weekday, from 8AM to 6PM. Weekends are given over to oldies -- but not the 100 or so "hits" that one might hear elsewhere on the dial. Everyone on the staff is a volunteer -- even management -- and the station broadcasts live between 16 and 20 hours a day, 365 days a year. Many of the hosts are quite knowledgeable about the music they play (much of which is from their own private collections) and -- unlike ANY other station in town -- there is no playlist; each host selects, plays and announces every song aired. Evenings feature "specialty" music shows, such as early R&B, blues, classic country and so forth.

The pity is that the station is only authorized one kilowatt of power, from a fairly low tower, and the dial is so crowded that proposing a power increase with a reasonable chance of approval is quite difficult. Though the station also operates translators in downtown Philadelphia, and in two northern suburbs, its coverage of the metropolitan area is still incomplete. Meanwhile, every Philadelphia AM station with a reasonable signal is co-owned with at least one other such station, and -- as mentioned above -- the entire commercial FM dial, save one station, is owned by just five group operators.

Consolidation has proven itself to be completely CONTRARY to the public interest; there is simply no reason why the FCC should allow the big group broadcasters to own even more stations in a market, as they've done a fine job ruining those that they already own.